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ARAB TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION

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## Identification card

Title:	Why it's Wrong to Say That Arab Uprisings Failed
Topic:	Social movement
Author:	MARC LYNCH
Photo:	
Type:	Article
Language:	English
Year:	March/28/2016
Source	This article was originally published at the Washington Post.
Source Link:	None

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## **Why it's Wrong to Say That Arab Uprisings Failed**

Conventional wisdom holds that the Arab uprisings that began in Tunisia in December 2010 failed. It's hard to argue with such a harsh verdict. Most Arab regimes managed to survive their popular challenges through some combination of cooptation, coercion and modest reform. Egypt's transition ended in an even harsher military regime. Yemen and Libya collapsed into state failure and regionalized wars, while Syria degenerated into a horrific war.

But simply dismissing the uprisings as a failure does not capture how fully they have transformed every dimension of the region's politics. Today's authoritarians are more repressive because they are less stable, more frightened and ever more incapable of sustaining their domination. With oil prices collapsing and popular discontent again spiking, it is obvious that the generational challenge of the Arab uprising is continuing to unfold. "Success or failure" is not a helpful way to understand these ongoing societal and political processes.

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## Marc Lynch

Instead of binary outcomes, political scientists have begun to more closely examine the new political forms and patterns, which the uprisings generated. A few months ago, the Project on Middle East Political Science convened a virtual symposium with 30 political scientists examining how the turmoil of the past five years have affected Arab politics. Those essays, many of them originally published on the Monkey Cage, are now available for open access download as an issue of POMEPS Studies. Those essays offer an ambivalent, nuanced perspective on what has and has not changed in the region since 2011 – and point to the many challenges to come.

The new politics shaped by the Arab uprising can be tracked along multiple levels of analysis, including regional international relations, regimes, states, and ideas.

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The uprisings of 2011 played out as a fully transnational event, with simultaneous challenges to most of the region's governments. The subsequent response was also fully regional. My new book "The New Arab Wars," to be published in a few weeks, and a recent POMEPS symposium, track these international relations dimensions of the response to the uprising.

The overthrow of leaders in Egypt and Tunisia badly frightened Arab regimes, which had come to believe themselves to be invincible, while also opening up new opportunities for aggressive new regional policies. The disagreement between these regimes and Washington over Egypt's transition and Syria's war (along with the Iran nuclear deal) drove an unusually intense public crisis in America's traditional alliance structure.

The balance of power within the region has been significantly altered. The upheavals have largely removed traditional regional powers such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria as significant actors. Size, population and historical position now seem to matter less for the exercise of regional power than do wealth, domestic stability, media empires, transnational networks and access to advanced weaponry.

Gulf states, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, took advantage of the uprisings to engage in unprecedented types of interventions across the region.

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Regimes within the Saudi sphere of influence, such as the monarchies of Jordan, Morocco and the Gulf Cooperation Council, received significant aid to buffer them against popular challengers. Gulf regimes poured resources into the challengers to other regimes outside that regional order, such as Libya's and Syria's, intensifying their political and then military struggles. Anti-Islamist forces in transitional countries such as Egypt and Tunisia received support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, while Islamists received support from Qatar and Turkey. Syria became the central site of a regional proxy war including not only the Arab powers but also Iran and Turkey.

Those proxy wars and interventions have manifestly changed the dynamics of regional international relations, mostly in destructive and counterproductive ways.

Of all the Arab states, which experienced mass protests in the first few months of 2011, only Tunisia has even partially succeeded at consolidating a democratic transition. Egypt is the model case for failure. The hopes of Tahrir Square and the June 2012 presidential election ended with the military coup of July 3, 2013. Managed transitions in Libya and Yemen collapsed, protests in Jordan and Morocco faded, and Bahrain's uprising was crushed by force. But that does not mean that any of these regimes have simply continued business as usual.

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The authoritarian regimes which currently hold power are for the most part less inclusive and more repressive.

Tunisia remains the sole partial success story of the uprising. By avoiding Egypt's fatal mistakes, Tunisians managed to find political compromise, as Monica Marks details, drafting a new constitution, and rotating power peacefully through elections. The success of the Tunisian transition remains very partial, of course. Repeated terrorist strikes have damaged an already weak economy and frustration with the political leadership is mounting. Still, for all the frustration and the return of old regime politicians to power, as Laryssa Chomiak observes, it would be wrong to say that nothing has changed. There is a richly diverse new set of political practices, which continue to evolve new opportunities, and the principle of meaningful elections has taken hold. Institutions ranging from the labor unions (Ian Hartshorn) to the military (Sharan Grewal) have been deeply changed by the new political environment.

The failure of Egypt's transition was not preordained, as Michael Wahid Hanna trenchantly observes. Ellen Lust, Gamal Soltan and Jakob Wichmann show powerfully how a toxic combination of fear and uncertainty interfered with democratic consolidation. The military (Ellis Goldberg) and police (Dina Rashed), the Muslim Brotherhood (Steven Brooke) and the political class (Michael Wahid Hanna)

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made choices under these difficult conditions which collectively derailed the transition. Despite the fervent belief by many Egyptians that this coup would restore and not end democracy, its outcome has proven to be every bit as repressive as political scientists expected. Egypt has certainly failed to consolidate a democratic transition, but its politics have equally certainly been fundamentally transformed by the upheavals of the last five years. Nobody should be fooled by Egypt's return to the practices and forms and personalities of the Mubarak era, however. Abdel Fatah al-Sissi's Egypt is more repressive and violent, less institutionalized, more economically challenged and internationally dependent. This is not the description of a stable regime.

While Egypt and Tunisia consume most attention, no Arab regime escaped unscathed from the uprisings. Morocco and Jordan managed to deflect challengers without significantly the underlying patterns of monarchical power. Morocco introduced constitutional reforms and allowed the election of an Islamist-led government, but as Merouan Mekouar argues this did not introduce real political accountability. Despite their frustration, Morocco's young activists continue to find new modes of challenge, as Adria Lawrence describes. The daunting effects of Syria's war helped Jordan's regime deflect political challenges, as Curtis Ryan explains. Bahrain survived by embracing

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exceptionally fierce forms of sectarian repression with long term costs to the regime's ruling strategy.

Even countries initially thought to have escaped Arab uprising protests have in fact been affected. Algeria's constitutional reforms, observes John Entelis, did not mask the reality of top-down rule and political stalemate. Palestinian politics (Daniel Nerenberg and Nathan Brown) have been disrupted. Lebanon's #YouStink protests showed the continuing hopes of its activists to find some way to challenge a stagnant political system. Qatar and Saudi Arabia each navigated a monarchical transition, with significant implications for their domestic and regional policies. In 2012, Iraq's Sunni protest movement intersected in devastating ways with the sectarianism of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's regime and the war in Syria to produce the conditions for the revival of the Islamic State.

The resurgence of Arab security states thus signals not a return to the old ways but a change in the ruling bargains and survival strategies of these embattled regimes.

If the surviving regimes have developed new forms of politics, several states have failed dramatically. The disastrous, externally managed, transitions in Libya and Yemen led to state failure, massive regional intervention and multiple competing governments. The degeneration of the uprising in Syria into a brutal and fully internationalized war has shattered that state for the foreseeable future.

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The failure of these states has left large pockets of ungoverned or contested space, while driving many millions of people from their homes. Kurdish forces have carved out their own de facto polities, while the so-called Islamic State clings tenaciously to its remaining territories spanning the Syrian-Iraqi border.

None of these states or their traumatized populations have any meaningful prospect of stable or peaceful governance in the near term. It is at this point unclear whether Syria, Iraq, Libya or Yemen still exist as sovereign states – or how their disaggregation affects regional politics over the long term.

Finally, there have also been palpable transformations in the realm of identities and ideas. It has never been more obvious that the only motivating idea for most Arab regimes is their own survival in power. But the very exposure of this naked survival instinct before an unprecedentedly mobilized Arab public sphere has been significant. The failure of the Arab uprising has been a painful political education for an extraordinarily talented generation of activists, public intellectuals and entrepreneurs. So too has the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in government, and the harsh outcome of the Egyptian coup, which too many of them supported.

This has begun to open the way for new political thinking and network formation, for now mostly off the public radar.

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There has been little answer to the aspirations for democracy and social justice, which Mark Beissinger, Amaney Jamal and Kevin Mazur show motivated the uprisings. Michael Robbins draws on Arab Barometer data to show that democracy remains a vital ambition, despite profound frustrations. Michaëlle Browers argues that Arab political thinkers are beginning to rethink concepts such as moderation and democracy.

But for all of that, more negative and alarming forces today dominate Arab public discourse. Sectarianism has taken deep root. The Egyptian media has been consumed by regime-supporting xenophobic nationalism. Islamist politics have moved toward the extremes, driven by Egypt's military coup, the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood, Syria's jihad and the rise of the Islamic State. Those pernicious ideas and identities will likely continue to thrive in the absence of viable political alternatives. The currently popular idea that revived Arab autocracy can provide an antidote to extremism is likely to prove just as misguided today as it has for the past half century.

Five years after the Arab uprising, it is no longer enough to score the cases as successes or failures. New political systems have taken shape that must be understood on their own terms. Power flows through different institutions and networks. New regional alliances, identities and political ideas have evolved. "Five Years After the Arab

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Uprising” shows how political scientists are beginning to grapple with these new politics on their own terms.

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